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Four congressmen, including U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-Highland Park, introduced federal legislation Thursday to block allowing "blended sewage" into the nation's waterways.

Kirk joined two Democrats — U.S. Reps. Bart Stupak of Michigan and Frank Pallone Jr. of New Jersey — and Florida Republican U.S. Rep. E. Clay Shaw in sponsoring the Save Our Waters From Sewage Act which fights the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency proposal to approve the dumping of partially treated sewage into U.S. waters.

"Dumping raw sewage into the Great Lakes is what I believe is causing our beach closings," Kirk said.

A draft policy issued by the EPA proposes that during rain events, publicly owned water treatment facilities would be allowed to combine filtered, but untreated sewage, with fully treated wastewater before discharge.

The EPA has yet to enact the policy, but it has indicated it will, thus bypassing secondary sewage treatment steps and allowing the "blended" effluent to be discharged.

Environmentalists and Illinois officials fear the proposed rule change would close more beaches in Lake and Cook counties and taint drinking water. More than half of Lake County receives its water from Lake Michigan.

Last year, the Lake County Health Department issued 167 swim bans along the county's Lake Michigan beaches due to the presence of E. coli bacteria.

Illinois Lt. Gov. Pat Quinn last month blasted the EPA for the rule change, assailing the

"pinheads in Washington" for allowing the dumping of blended sewage into waterways.

The rule change would allow cities with outdated wastewater systems — like Milwaukee — to mix treated and untreated sewage during heavy rain events. Last May, Milwaukee's sewage district dumped billions of gallons of untreated sewage into Lake Michigan.

"It is the responsibility of all states and cities bordering the Great Lakes to act as good environmental stewards to our country's most precious freshwater resource," Kirk said. "Passing this legislation will ensure Great Lakes states and cities adhere to this responsibility.

"Congress must lead in protecting the Great Lakes, the crown jewel of the Midwest's ecosystem," Kirk added.

The congressman said the legislation was introduced a week after 135 members of Congress from both parties objected to the blended-sewage proposal.

Environmental groups praised the legislation and the four congressmen for introducing it.

"In effect, this legislation would force EPA to dump its reckless sewage dumping policy," said Nancy Stoner of the National Resources Defense Council, noting the act will stop the EPA from turning the clock back on 30 years of water protection under the Clean Water Act.

"Congress faces a clear choice: Will our government continue to require effective treatment for sewage to remove pollutants that kill fish, poison drinking water sources, close beaches, destroy coral reefs, contaminate shellfish, and make people sick? Or will we reverse course by allowing routine sewage dumping whenever it rains?" she said.